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RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2830  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1189  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1362  
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SUBJECT: ERITREANS JUBILANT AFTER ETHIOPIAN BRIGADIER  
GENERAL DEFECTS

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA Jennifer McIntyre, for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) Celebrations continue in Asmara with military and government officials following the defection of Ethiopian Brigadier General Kemal Geltu with a number of troops on August 9. Previously commander of Ethiopia's 18th Army Division, Geltu is an ethnic Oromo who reportedly was denied a recent promotion. Geltu allegedly crossed the border between Adi Teklay and Sheshebit, near Badme, during poor weather conditions with hundreds of troops. (Note: UN SITREPS report the number as 150 troops while Eritrean officials report the number as being in the hundreds with rumors of over 1000 troops being the extreme. End note.) While the BBC reported shooting during the crossing and the death of two soldiers, an Eritrean government official denied the shooting saying Geltu and Eritrean officials planned ahead for his defection and coordinated a peaceful crossing of the border.

¶2. (C) Jubilant Eritrean military officials spent the nights of August 9 and 10, celebrating this "victory" in a hotel in Asmara. Joining to watch the well hyped interview with Geltu on Eri-TV, a military official shared with Embassy employee that the true number of defecting troops was over 1000 however the GSE for security reasons did not want to publicize this number. In addition, an army colonel explained that the best part was not about those who came to Eritrea but rather that Geltu had recruited others to defect to other countries, such as Uganda, and possibly in the future. Others present at the celebration spoke of the recruiters remaining in the Ethiopian military who will diligently work to dismantle the Ethiopian force.

¶3. (C) Also discussed was the symbolism of his crossing at Badme. Allegedly, Geltu lead the Ethiopian offensive at Badme during the 1998-2000 conflict. One Eritrean official was heard saying "we won him over".

¶4. (U) While the mood was festive and Eritrean officials seem thrilled at what they are calling a success in the battle with Ethiopia, Geltu's interview mentioned nothing about the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Rather his interview on Eri-tel and with the BBC focused on Ethiopia's domestic policies and the oppression and

struggle of the Oromo people. During both interviews he commented on the need to respect the rule of law in Ethiopia and about bringing peace and equality for all in Ethiopia. In particular he noted in the BBC interview his intention was not "to give military secrets to the Eritrean government."

15. (C) Comment: Of course the GSE is promoting Geltu's defection as a victory in the fight with Ethiopia. Yet, Geltu's absence of public remarks about the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict seem to indicate that his defection is not the heroic victory claimed by the Eritreans but rather a sign of Ethiopia's domestic problems and the continued resentment of the Oromo people. End Comment.

McIntyre